Our new awareness of the role of the alchemical tradition in the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century is in danger of being jeopardized by those who seek to interpret it as the introduction of irrational elements in the scientific revolution. This is unfortunate since the real question is not whether men wished...
to be rational or irrational but, whether, in the light of rationality as it was then understood, the alchemical and hermetic traditions had credentials that made them respectable. Allen G. Debus has distinguished himself by the exemplary open-mindedness with which he has studied the chemical philosophy, and his achievement sets high standards by which subsequent works will have to be measured. Debus has the rare historian’s gift of seeing theories as they appeared to those who first formulated them. He helps us read the works of Paracelsian science with the unworn eyes of the contemporaries, and he challenges us to ponder what alchemy actually was in the historical context in which it flourished. By looking at the Paracelsian iatrochemists, who combined the study of medicine and chemistry, not superficially, as self-deluded mystics, or, anachronistically, as chemists who failed to bring about a chemical revolution, but as the Chemical Philosophers they considered themselves, Debus is able to illustrate the true nature of their endeavour. We begin to see why their appeal was so broad and why their ideas were discussed by people interested in religious and educational reform as well as by physicians and philosophers.

For the Chemical Philosophers, the unity and harmony of the universe was an obvious consequence of creation by a wise and benevolent God. This belief was shared by the vast majority of seventeenth century thinkers who instinctively shunned the materialistic implications of the mechanical philosophy. They could not fail to attend to a new philosophy that professed to achieve better scientific results with principles that conformed to Christian precepts rather than those of the “Pagan Aristotle”. But this religious tone was not generally confessional, and many radicals welcomed the prospect of bypassing the authority of the established churches to pursue and independent study of the two God-given books: the Bible and the Created Book of Nature.

God created all things that they may be perfect and the iatrochemist considered it a privilege to be called upon to assist the natural process towards perfection by removing the pure from the impure and allowing the seeds of things to attain their ends. Baser metals could be hastened toward perfection and ill-tempered constitutions could be amended with the aid of chemistry. The spagiric art, as after Paracelsus alchemy was defined, worked for the well-being of nature whether vegetable, mineral or animal. It was a practical art and alchemist were not afraid of working with their own hands. They ridiculed the pedantry and logical exercises of the Schoolmen who cared for nothing but the words of Galen and Aristotle. The philosophy they appealed to was neither the qualitative physics of Aristotle nor the mathematical harmonies of the Neo-Platonists but Renaissance naturalism in which macrocosm-microcosm analogies provided clues and, in some cases such as Fludd, even evidence for the truth of general theories. This organic vision of the universe and the insistence on experiments made them scornful of mathematical rigour. When Fludd accused Kepler of belonging to the “vulgar crowd that pursues quan-